Indiana Department of Environmental Management

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(Text does not include verbatim comments)

Good morning. It is nice to be with you today.

Here we are about ten days from Christmas and a week from the eve of Hanukkah. While most people are preparing for the holidays, we are looking far beyond that.

I am always intrigued with how the same event triggers different impressions from different people.

For example, when people think about the holiday season and winter, they picture snow, a Currier and Ives setting where a one-horse open sleigh carries a family to grandma's for holiday cheer.

Our view of this time of year is, just a little, bit more realistic and certainly based on our day-to-day lives. When we think about snow, we also think about combined sewer discharges. Maybe, just maybe, you and I might picture a discharge point in that picturesque stream in that same Currier and Ives print.

But, that's what we all do for a living. We think about and deal with these issues so our families, friends and neighbors won't have to. And it is a sign that we need to work harder when these issues come to everyone's attention. I don't think I need to tell you – the choir – that people are paying more and more attention to clean water issues.

Fortunately, I have learned in the almost two years that I have been IDEM commissioner that there are a lot of good, dedicated people in Indiana who care very deeply about this issue. They know the importance of good water quality in our rivers and streams and appreciate the role that we all play in providing clean water.

It is very rewarding to see this partnership between the Purdue School of Engineering and Technology, Indiana Association of Cities and Towns, the Consulting Engineers of Indiana, Indiana Constructors, the Indiana Department of Transportation and IDEM. This symposium brings together a program that promotes the development and use of innovative technologies to help solve Indiana's long-standing water quality problems associated with discharges from combined sewer overflows and surface run-off water. As private and government professionals, we all have a responsibility to find affordable and effective measures to minimize the adverse impacts these water problems have on Indiana's rivers and streams.

We should be aware that while most people don't think CSO when the snow falls, they do care about water quality. Let me share some recent polling data with you. Between January 13th -16th of this year, a CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll asked 1,027 adults: "Which of these statements comes closer to your own point of view:

1) Protection of the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of curbing economic growth, or 2) Economic growth should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent." Tough question!

But the results of this survey weren't a squeaker. The majority was so clear Al Gore and George Bush both would have been happy. 70 percent of those polled said the environment and 23 percent said economic growth. A three-to-one margin in favor of the environment.

Those are fairly dramatic numbers and there is a risk that the simplistic, one-or-the-other choice offered by the question doesn't give us a clear answer. But a closer look at historical polling data on the environment shows that this survey does reflect public opinion. Year-after-year, in poll-after-poll, people in overwhelming numbers have said they place a high priority on protecting the water, air and land.

A few highlights from a Gallup poll drive this point home.

Ninety-four percent of those polled said the environmental problems facing our country are serious. Specifically, 17 percent said "extremely serious," 38 percent said "very serious" and 39 percent said "somewhat serious."

Think about those numbers. Ninety-four percent of the people believe we face serious environmental problems in our country. That's nearly everyone. More than half, 55 percent, say those problems are "very" or "extremely" serious.

The poll asked people whether they personally worry about specific types of pollution. And again, the responses were very clear.

Drinking water pollution? Seventy-two percent said they worry "a great deal" about it and 20 percent said "a fair amount."

Pollution of our rivers, lakes and reservoirs? 66 percent said they worry "a great deal" about it; 24 percent said they worry "a fair amount."

It's important to note that the majority of people polled – more than half in each instance – worry a great deal about the environment.

Citizen concerns about water issues dominate the environmental landscape, not just in Indiana but across the nation. And with good reason! Water is, after all, the essence of life. It's tangible, we can see it, we can hear it, we can taste it, we can feel it and, sometimes, we can even smell it . . . although that is not always a good thing.

Concern and public interest have driven the application of new and innovative technologies that have made dramatic improvements in our quality of life. Public cercern and interest has gotten us to where we are today. It was only 30 short years ago that the Cuyahoga River was burning and Lake Erie was considered dead. I'm glad to report that you can no longer toast a marshmellow on the Cuyahoga and Lake Erie lives!

The beginning of the combined sewer overflow problem began innocently enough over a century ago. In the late 1800s, as cities sprang up across the nation, there was a need to remove accumulated storm water from the streets and people laid pipes to water away from the streets and into the nearest waterway. With the advent of indoor plumbing, these same pipes made it very convenient to construct lateral connections from homes and businesses to dispose of these wastes. And guess where this waste went? To the nearest waterway . . . the same waterway.

By the 1950s, 60s and 70s, federal grant programs provided funding for the construction of municipal wastewater treatment plants.

Cities that had sent their sewage directly to the river built interceptor sewers, which redirected the sewage to new wastewater treatment plants. Engineers designed these plants to treat minimal amounts called an average, daily dry-weather flow with some added capacity for growth. The points where the old storm sewers and the new interceptor sewers intersected became the location for combined sewer overflow, or CSO, discharge points. When rainfall and the flow of sanitary sewage exceeded the capacity of the interceptor sewer pipes, the excess flow tops the diversion dam and discharges into the receiving stream. The combined sewer overflows work exactly how the engineers designed them to meet the needs of 40, 50 or 60 years ago! However, today's reality is we have untreated sewage discharged to streams. Is that any more advanced than when the Greeks and Romans first conveyed their wastewater away from their homes over 2 millennia ago!